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Undecided Stories: Alfred Hitchcock's *Blackmail* and The Problem of Moral Agency

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Abstract: This article considers the question of moral agency in the work of Alfred Hitchcock through a detailed analysis of a crucial sequence from his early film *Blackmail* (1929). Focusing on this representative moment the author's goal is to examine the problem of moral agency *per se*, rather than to catalogue expositions of specific ethical problems in a range of different Hitchcock films. In distinguishing between ethical rules and moral impulses, the author follows Zygmunt Bauman (1993, 1995, 2000) to examine the utility of this distinction in relation to the issue of moral agency in Hitchcock's work. Ethical rules, it is argued, are one aspect of our moral experience that often runs directly counter to our moral intuitions.

Keywords: Alfred Hitchock; Moral agency; Ethical rules

Résumé : Cet article porte sur la question d'autonomie morale dans l'œuvre d'Alfred Hitchcock en effectuant l'analyse détaillée d'une séquence cruciale dans une de ses premières œuvres, *Chantage* (1929). L'auteur, en mettant l'accent sur un moment représentatif du film, a l'intention d'examiner le problème d'autonomie morale en soi plutôt que de répertorier des problèmes éthiques particuliers dans un éventail de films d'Hitchcock. En faisant la distinction entre règles éthiques et impulsions morales, il s'inspire de Zygmunt Bauman dans le but d'examiner l'utilité de cette distinction par rapport à l'autonomie morale dans l'œuvre d'Hitchcock. Il soutient que les règles éthiques sont un aspect de notre expérience morale qui souvent s'oppose directement à nos intuitions morales.

Mots clés : Alfred Hitchcock; Autonomie morale; Règles éthiques

I'd prefer to build a film around a situation rather than a plot.
- Alfred Hitchcock

It is half the art of storytelling to keep a story free from explanation.
- Walter Benjamin

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Introduction

This article considers the question of moral agency in the work of Alfred Hitchcock by focusing on a representative moment in one of his early British films, *Blackmail* (1929), his first sound production.[1] Approaching Hitchcock's work in this way enables me to present a view of his films that is consistent with the expanding literature extolling his continuing relevance to film studies, feminism, the field of communication, and even philosophy.[2] It further allows for a discussion of moral and ethical themes in Hitchcock's work beyond conventional ethical precepts that are occasionally presented as being central to understanding his moral position, such as the theory of retributive justice. This is not to argue that justice, retribution, and punishment are unimportant motifs in Hitchcock's films, a notion that is plainly untrue. But in the present article I want to resist the temptation to simply bifurcate Hitchcock's moral world into good and evil, or guilty and innocent, to highlight an overlooked element of moral thinking represented in his work. This is the view that Hitchcock's films frequently present moral agency in the context of concepts like indeterminacy, undecidability, and anti-foundationalism. This view, it should be apparent, stands at some distance from those expressions of ethical practice rooted in reasoned deliberation and rational calculation. But, as Zygmunt Bauman has pointed out, it is important to recognize that the moral impulse can be recast in terms of ethical exactitude only at a certain cost.

> Reason is about making correct decisions, while moral responsibility precedes all thinking about decisions as it does not, and cannot care about any logic which would allow the approval of an action as correct. Thus, morality can be 'rationalized' only at the cost of self-denial and self-attrition. (1993, pp. 247-48)

Moral agency, then, is a more complex problem—and a more ambiguous state—than is ordinarily recognized in the more conventional "redemptive" readings of Hitchcock's work.[3] Conceptions of justice and punishment, whether these are presented as being meted out by the law or by fate, introduce a teleological scheme into the evaluation of the moral conundrums with which Hitchcock deals, a scheme that can often be a rather negligible aspect of his narratives. It is important to recognize in Hitchcock's films a tendency to privilege the inherent appeal of moral obligation at the expense of unreflective fidelity to ethical rules. To move the analysis of Hitchcock's moral theorizing beyond the hegemony of ethical certitude is the principal goal of this paper.

By arguing that the idea of the moral impulse is distinct from the sphere of ethical responsibilities, I am following a line of thinking derived from the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas and a number of commentators influenced by his work, including Zygmunt Bauman, John Caputo, and Dwight Furrow.[4] Drawing from the works of these authors, I propose that ethics is the product of a reason-based, heteronomous code that parallels the structure of the Law. Morality, on the other hand, is an autonomous expression of individual responsibility, which, by its very nature as autonomous, defies the codification and formalization that is implicit in various systems of ethics (business ethics, medical ethics, professional codes of ethics, et cetera). Of course, there is heteronomy in the moral condition

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of being-for the Other, in finding our sense of self inaugurated by the presence of the Other as one whose appearance brings forth the urge to take responsibility for the Other's welfare. The moral condition is an individual calling or election that suggests that I am responsible for my own responsibility (Levinas, 1996). Ethics is about duties, whereas morality is about individual responsibility.

Each of these writers presents a radical interpretation of ethical philosophy that challenges the priority of ontology, a "phenomenology of the other," as John Wild has written (1961, p. 13). Such thinking suggests a radical reinterpretation of ethics. Perhaps it is no surprise, then, that John Caputo has entitled one of his books exploring the impact of Levinas on contemporary philosophy *Against Ethics* (1993). Indeed, as Caputo argues in a more recent work:

> The business as usual of ethics has given out and the ethical verities that we all like to think are true, the beliefs and practices we all cherish, are now seen to be in a more difficult spot than we liked to think. The end of ethics is thus a moment of unvarnished honesty in which we are forced to concede that in ethics we are more likely to begin with the conclusions, with the "ends" or triumphant ethical finales we had in mind all along, and worry about the premises later. . . the end of ethics means that the premises invoked in ethical theory always come too late, after the fact. (2000, p. 173)

This view that moral sentiments are distinct from the logic of ethical precepts—what Furrow (1995) has labeled the anti-theory position—clearly poses problems for those keen on expressing a clearly articulated and rigorous theory of how best to achieve appropriate ethical conduct. But as Levinas once commented, "My task does not consist in constructing ethics. I am simply trying to find its meaning" (1985, p. 90). So too, my principal concern in this article is to reflect on the notion of moral agency as it is presented in Hitchcock's work rather than to develop a theoretical edifice into which his moral thought can be neatly placed. Thus I follow the philosopher John Caputo who has written, "Undecidability does not detract from the urgency of decision; it simply underlines the difficulty" (Caputo, 1993, p. 4). It is the ontological difficulty in being a moral agent rather than the specific challenge of determining right from wrong that provides my entry into the films of Alfred Hitchcock.

To enter into a discussion of Hitchcock's world through a discussion of moral agency recognizes the importance of Robin Wood's observation respecting the "disconcerting moral sense" of Hitchcock's films (1989, p. 67). Wood is correct in suggesting that this disconcertion is more ethical than aesthetic; that the existential drama of making choices is more unsettling than the bewilderment produced by a disturbing artwork. Hitchcock often seemed inclined to the view that moral agency battled ethical principles to the same extent that it struggled with future uncertainties, that the central dilemma was not how to arrive at moral correctness, but whether this goal was even achievable.

The moral universe of Hitchcock's films

That Hitchcock's films are predicated on the proposition that moral forces are at work in our most quotidian affairs is clear; indeed, his work frequently manifests

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the problem of moral agency even as it seeks to problematize the impetus for ethical conduct. Hence it is no surprise that many writers have found it useful to deconstruct Hitchcock's work in relation to the sphere of morality.

Perhaps the earliest work to make this theme an explicit feature of its approach to the study of Hitchcock's films was Eric Rohmer and Claude Chabrol's *Hitchcock: The First Forty-Four Films* (1979). Rohmer and Chabrol's book is conventionally seen as one of the groundbreaking works on Hitchcock's films for two reasons. First, the authors were pivotal figures in the construction of Hitchcock's public image as an auteur, a description Hitchcock would come to embrace as a kind of secular canonization even as it provoked a serious and ongoing debate in film studies.[5] Second, Rohmer and Chabrol provided a methodical, if overly schematic, reading of Hitchcock's films that suggested the central place that the theme of exchange played in his work, conceptualizing exchange as a theme of moral expression (transferability of guilt); a psychological dynamic (the doubling or doppelganger motif); a dramatic form (suspense); and a concrete or formal articulation (the to-and-fro movement of parallel editing, for instance). Each of these notions of exchange was plainly a dialectical adventure emphasizing the dynamic and processual nature of Hitchcock's films. However, it is the first of these modes of exchanges, transferability of guilt, that is of particular interest here.

The transfer of guilt suggested to Rohmer and Chabrol that moral agency, as depicted in Hitchcock's films, was often presented as having a fortuitous quality insofar as the ascription of guilt was often shown to be of an essentially random nature. Indeed, guilt could be assumed as readily as it could be ascribed, and it was this attribute that made transferability a crucial part of their analysis of Hitchcock's moral vision. Thus their readings of Hitchcock's films are generally framed around a limited series of metaphysical dichotomies informed by their adherence to the thesis that Hitchcock's Catholicism was the originating source for his fixation on moral issues.

Subsequent writers treating the theme of morality in Hitchcock's work both followed and diverged from Rohmer and Chabrol's theories of exchange. Robin Wood recognized Rohmer and Chabrol's text as "a very serous attempt to account for the resonances [Hitchcock's] films can evoke in the mind," but Wood was also concerned by the teleological manner in which their analyses were carried out (1989, p. 62; brackets added). The problem, he argued, was that Rohmer and Chabrol had determined in advance the moral limits of Hitchcock's work: his Catholicism. This presupposition, though illuminating in certain respects, was "ridiculous" when applied uncritically to each of Hitchcock's films, Wood pointed out, and sometimes led Rohmer and Chabrol to force an interpretation where the fit was suspect and thereby "distort the film drastically" (p. 63).

Similar arguments concerning the importance of theology to Hitchcock's moral ruminations run through several of the director's biographies. Donald Spoto's *The Dark Side of Genius* (1983) argues strongly in favor of Hitchcock's moral universe as having been produced by his Catholic upbringing, telling us "He was a profoundly Victorian Catholic, a rigid moralist" (p. 277). This interpretation, as indeed most interpretations that look back to Hitchcock's childhood,

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is bolstered by the filmmaker's own words, for in his interviews with Truffaut he claimed that the time he spent as a child at the Jesuit St. Ignatius College had a lasting influence on him: "It was probably during this period with the Jesuits that a strong sense of fear developed—moral fear—the fear of being involved in anything evil. I always tried to avoid it" (Truffaut, 1983, pp. 25-26). Self-reflective comments of this nature have helped to fuel an interest in the "Catholic Hitchcock," but the director's penchant for clever misdirection is well known, and it is certainly possible that his ethical presumptions were actually more bourgeois than theological. It is true that many common motifs in Hitchcock's films such as the transferability of guilt can be cast in religious if not strictly Catholic terms, and for that reason many of his moral attitudes would seem at least in part to be motivated by theistic impulses.

To approach the representation of ethical praxis in Hitchcock's films as having been produced by his religious upbringing or as a consequence of specifically bourgeois inclinations is to focus on a common and somewhat limited range of factors: the rightness or wrongness of specific behaviours; the prospect of vengeance or retribution for those actions; and the likelihood of redemption for characters who have transgressed against the moral order. It is precisely these sorts of preoccupations from which I want to distance my analysis to advance what Bauman has called a postmodern ethics, a view of the moral impulse as an ambivalent ontological state that dismisses "the possibility of a non-ambivalent, non-aporetic ethical code" (1993, p. 9). In developing this position I will temporarily set aside more traditional readings of Hitchcock's moral universe as a site of "redemptive" promises. This is not to say that I am ignoring or unaware of the visceral evil of Hitchcock's work. Rather, I am concerned with a reading of moral agency in his films that acknowledges but goes beyond his religious upbringing, his concessions to bourgeois philosophy, and his psychological makeup and personal idiosyncrasies. I want to explore moral agency as a central problematic in understanding the ethical anxieties provoked by his narratives. No doubt Hitchcock's Catholicism played a role in shaping his ethics and his view of life generally, but it is difficult to ascertain the extent to which religious moral ideals influenced his films.

The myth of moral perfectibility

To begin this discussion of moral agency in Hitchcock's work, I first want to frame the argument distinguishing the moral impulse from ethical codification with a citation from Zygmunt Bauman:

> Only rules can be universal. One may legislate universal rule-dictated *duties,* but moral *responsibility* exists solely in interpellating the individual and being carried individually. Duties tend to make humans alike; responsibility is what makes them into individuals. Humanity is not captured in common denominators—it sinks and vanishes there. The morality of the moral subject does not, therefore, have the character of a rule. One may say that the moral is what *resists* codification, formalization, socialization, universalization. The moral is what remains when the job of ethics. . . has been done. (1993, p. 54; emphasis in original)

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To act ethically, then, is to abdicate one's responsibility for the Other in order to express fidelity to the code, or the law. Ethics, Bauman argues, has as one of its most important tasks the job of relieving us of our responsibilities as moral agents. In place of these autonomous responsibilities we are filled with heteronomous duties. Ethics, because it pretends to the illusion of universality, speaks with a single voice, and celebrates the effacement of individual obligation. Ethics' duty, as it were, is to make duty itself the goal of ethical action.

Morality, however, is fraught with ambivalence and individual culpability; it acknowledges openly the pretensions of universal conventions of correct behaviour and repositions obligation in relation to the Other. Whereas ethics is a negotiated treaty in which reciprocal obligations form the essential bases for enforcing contractual relations, morality is a nonreversible encounter with the Other, one in which reciprocity is not the essence of the relationship, but its annihilation. To do what I must for the Other *because* of a reciprocal agreement (or the expectation of reciprocity) is not to act morally, but to act from a different motive entirely.

As moral agents each of us must deal with the problem of having to choose a course of action from a range of possibilities that conventionally includes incommensurable options. Knowing that we have made the right choice, the choice we deem most morally acceptable, is difficult, for choices always entail other agents, competing interests, and overlapping social contexts. One of the main difficulties with moral agency, is that when we seek direction for making our moral decision, moral theorizing might serve to confirm our inclinations rather than to guide our choosing, our actual agency being subsumed within the narrative of a specific theoretical position. This is the view of philosopher Dwight Furrow, who says, "If we understand moral prescriptions to be worth endorsing only if they conform to a theory, our moral judgments are undecidable." According to Furrow, this is because "consistent and intelligent theorists can argue either side of a case without result" (Furrow, p. xiii).

Moreover, any one of us can be a consistent and intelligent theorist and at the same time be unaware of the extent to which our actions are guided by our theoretical frames. It is possible to be a neo-Kantian when faced with one ethical predicament, and an act-utilitarian at a later time when confronting a different conundrum, choosing whichever approach best suits our preferences and desires in either case. We can also switch theoretical frames across time as a single event unfolds. For example, at the start of a military conflict we might argue that even a single casualty is one tragic death too many, but as the conflict persists and the body count mounts, we might be tempted to switch theories and argue that a greater good is being served by these accumulated, tragic fatalities. In other words, we can provide theoretically sound arguments pointing to antithetically opposed courses of action, but no hint of experiential continuity will necessarily tie the decision-events together in the moral domain.

Such incontinuity could raise questions about moral character, but psychologizing this way is rarely useful insofar as there is nothing especially aberrant in switching theoretical positions in order to preserve the outward appearance of consistency. Indeed, even in cases where theoretical consistency is preserved (as

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when one remains a neo-Kantian across all situations, for instance), the result may be theoretical uniformity rather than persistent ethical correctness. Hence Furrow argues for the contingency of moral experience and for the absence of any rational principles more fundamental than the moral practices by which we happen to live, that will justify those practices (Furrow, p. xiii).

This focus on the experiential and the practical is clearly a postmodern take on moral problems with its tendency to privilege indeterminate and liquefied subject positions. As Bauman says, "We know now that we will face forever moral dilemmas without unambiguously good (that is, universally agreed upon, uncontested) solutions, and that we will be never sure where such solutions are to be found; not even whether it would be good to find them" (Bauman, 1995, p. 31). This will seem initially nihilistic to many, but as he writes elsewhere, Bauman is concerned with challenging the modernist illusion that "there is an end to the road along which we proceed, an attainable telos of historical change. . . [a] complete mastery over the future—so complete that it puts paid to all contingency, contention, ambivalence and unanticipated consequences of human undertakings" (Bauman, 2000, p. 29).

Furrow makes a similar point. The problem of moral contingency, he points out, is historical as well as philosophical: people across the ages, in myriad cultures, have sought to act morally, but have frequently ended up performing (or acquiescing to) "monstrous acts of cruelty" (Furrow, p. xv). Injustice and brutality have been carried out by those who claimed (and possibly believed) that they were acting in the name of what is morally right, and who imagined that their actions would secure a more just and compassionate world. According to Furrow, this "complicity of goodness and evil" suggests that "morality has a tragic dimension, that even our most cherished moral ideals can generate an extraordinary moral blindness" (Furrow, p. xv). Furrow does not propose that efforts to be morally accountable are utterly wasted although such efforts can produce the sorts of consequences they are intended to defend against. Furrow puts the point plainly by stating, "We can never be sure that our attempts to alleviate suffering will not lead to more suffering" (Furrow, p. 192).

That good and evil collude in the production of the fantasy that strict attention to a code of ethical reasoning will yield the single, correct decision is tragic in the classic sense. Hence the myth that we can perfect ourselves as rational moral agents—and especially by the strict application of rationality—is belied by everyday practice (and the ontology of moral experience) though it is sustained by the desire to do right, a desire that occasionally feeds on a confused conception of the relation between logical reasoning and ethical precepts. This confusion is expressed in the belief that to the extent that we can reason correctly, so too can we conduct ourselves in a morally appropriate fashion; that moral conduct, in other words, is completely reducible to an empirical substratum, such that ethical rectitude can be produced from proper, logical reasoning. There is little doubt that in the realm of moral determinations some decisions are better than others, but moral perfectibility is a myth in that it holds out the promise not of better choices, but of the best choice, the single, univocal option that follows from a process of accurate deductive calculation.[6]

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That it is difficult to know that the appropriate course of ethical conduct has been chosen hardly needs establishing. But although this is obvious, the impetus to behave in an ethically correct fashion performs an important sense-making function by establishing a coherent match among events, motives, and sentiments. Indeed, in the world of cinema this impetus for morally appropriate conduct can be an important component of conventional narrative structure where motivation is commonly concentrated in the protagonist's character and actions. In other words, if conventional accounts of the Hollywood narrative are carefully examined, the notion of ideological closure will be seen to be closely allied with the view that the triumph of good is a consequence of having chosen the right course of ethical action. Thus narrative closure, ethical certitude, and ideology are woven together in the seamless cinematic realism that masks contradiction and makes a fetish of moral perfectibility. Sense making, in this respect, has ethical as well as empirical and aesthetic dimensions.

Why is Hitchcock important to this discussion? Hitchcock problematizes the union of these narrative elements, showing us in particular the artificiality of closure, the fallacy of ethical certitude, and the fissures in ideology. He shows us, to borrow from Bauman, that "contingency, contention, ambivalence and unanticipated consequences of human undertakings, (Bauman, 2000, p. 29)" are the normal course of affairs, not the anomalies. Hitchcock's films are visually arresting accounts of human imperfection in which the impulse for goodness is forced to contend with powerful, countervailing forces. In his work we may indeed confront the impurities of our own desires, as Wood (1985) would have it, but likewise we glimpse the fragility of those desires as they are romanticized in the myth of moral perfectibility.

Desire is the *sine qua non* of human motivation, an incorporeal specter haunting the lives of his narratives' characters. At one moment transcendent and the next profane, desire is the internal (and eternal) dialogue with the soul animated so often in Hitchcock's work. And while desire is often most central when his characters treat it as peripheral, and most peripheral when they regard it as essential, rarely does this amount to outright moralism. Indeed, Hitchcock's films are didactic without becoming sermonic, principled without succumbing to sentimentality, brutal without surrendering to evil. We may wish to perfect ourselves by transcending the conditions that bind us to the material world, but the incessant pull of our corporeal nature—that matrix of human and social relations—makes apparent that genuine escape is itself a myth. We are condemned to our condition as moral beings, animated by desires that both constrain and enable. We are, as Kenneth Burke has said, "rotten with perfection" (Burke, 1968, p. 16).

In addition to all of this, Hitchcock's films are open-ended readerly texts (Barthes, 1975) that render the disconcerting aspects of lived experience aesthetically appealing, and in doing so, invite us to consider the allure of those passions about which bourgeois sensibilities prefer repressed silence. To betray the bourgeois passion for social convention is a hallmark of many of the endings of Hitchcock's films, for his is an aesthetic of dissatisfaction through which we experience the frustration of our longings, requited or otherwise. The "nagging

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doubts" that figure prominently in his work are openings into subjects for which satisfactory conclusions are commonly lacking.

The impulse to resist ideological closure is consequently one of the more pronounced features of what Wood calls Hitchcock's "disconcerting moral sense." This resistance, I would argue, is produced from Hitchcock's tendency to see institutional modes of proscribing behaviour—including the cinema's institutional mode of representation—as inherently suspect. The resulting discomfiture produced by this resistance is both emotional and intellectual in character, and can perhaps best be assuaged by accepting that social convention is too often represented as a panacea capable of warding off the evils of endemic uncertainty. But such evils are not easily swept aside. "The moral situation is one of inherent ambivalence," writes Bauman, "and it would not be moral without a choice between good and evil" (Bauman 1995, p. 7). More importantly, Bauman goes on to say,

> We understand now that uncertainty is not a temporary nuisance, which can be chased away through learning the rules, or surrendering to expert advice, or just doing what others do—but a permanent condition of life; we may say more—it is the very soil in which the moral self takes root and grows. Moral life is a life of continuous uncertainty. . . . Moral responsibility is *unconditional* and in principle infinite—and thus one can recognize moral persons by their never quenched dissatisfaction with their moral performance; the gnawing suspicion that they were not moral enough. (Bauman 1995, p. 287; emphasis in original)

Bauman's analysis of the place of uncertainty in the moral life of the subject—an analysis shaped by the influence of the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas—suggests the endemic and foundational nature of uncertainty in the world of human judgment including, and perhaps most tellingly, the world of moral judgment and reasoning. Ideological closure under such conditions is clearly not feasible when critical reflection by moral agents reveals, as Bauman expresses it, "the gnawing suspicion that they were not moral *enough*." Decisions taken with the aim of resolving moral problems will translate metaphysics (the moral impulse) into epistemology (rules, codifications, ethical conduct), but when understood in terms of the knowledge of right and wrong ethical conundrums will be undecidable, as Furrow has noted above. Hence no genuine closure is possible under such conditions because the end point is a judgment, and a judgment, as Derrida (1992) has famously argued, is never fixed on epistemological bedrock. It is a judgment precisely because it is not an unassailable fact. In the end we must live with the consequences of our decisions.

This is not to say that there are absolutely no happy endings in Hitchcock's films, but even in those that conclude with traditional expressions of bourgeois, heterosexual fulfillment, there are frequently indications of an underlying anxiety regarding both the emotional condition of the central characters, and the reliability of the narrative's concluding images. Narratological uncertainty, in other words, is often a way of denying the myth of perfectibility (living "happily ever after") by making closure arbitrary rather than natural, ('natural' being understood as preeminently ideological). Closure, whether realized as a conscious or

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unconscious interpretive preference, is a sense-making practice that also frequently serves a conciliatory or inclusive function. In this respect it is generally seen as having an affiliative capacity that is at its most effective when interpolating its predetermined middle-class audience (to "live happily ever after" implies possession of the means to do so). But closure of this kind is often denounced—and even subverted—in Hitchcock's films, the result being a vertiginous destabilization of commonly cherished ideas about love, relationships, and even authority. This is because Hitchcock never tires of showing us just how difficult it is to be certain that we have made the right decision, and how, having once decided on a course of action, we are often forced to accept compromise in place of resolution. Moral agents must act, in other words, but what can guarantee the moral appropriateness of their actions?

The moral tale of *Blackmail* (1929)

Consider the concluding sequence in one of Hitchcock's early British pictures, *Blackmail* (1929), as helpful in clarifying some of the claims I have made about the manner in which Hitchcock's work refuses ideological closure, and the consequences of this refusal in relation to the previous discussion placing ethical duties in opposition to moral responsibilities. In particular, I want to relate my analysis of this film's closing moments to my earlier comments respecting the myth of moral perfectibility and Furrow's notion of the complicity of goodness and evil.

In the concluding scenes of *Blackmail*, Frank and Alice prepare to travel down a corridor at police headquarters toward the station lobby. They have just come from the chief inspector's office where an opportune phone call to the inspector moments earlier has prevented Alice from confessing her responsibility for the deaths of Crewe and Tracy. Distracted by the telephone, which is an important recurring motif in the film, the inspector has instructed Frank to take Alice from his office and deal with her problem. Frank, of course, has established in his own mind that Alice is indeed Crewe's killer, and they now stand huddled together outside of the inspector's office as Alice attempts in choked, inchoate sentences to explain to Frank both her guilt and the reasons for her actions. They hold hands in this tight two-shot as the camera frames them from the front. Frank tells Alice that he knows of her guilt and partially pulls the glove she left at the crime scene from his pocket as evidence of his knowledge. The camera then follows them as they begin their funereal walk down the hallway, changing to a rear point of view as they approach the doors to the lobby.

At the lobby doors Frank drops his right hand lifelessly to his side; then both Frank and Alice release their grip on the other's hand simultaneously, as if by some internal cue they have come to a sudden and mutual realization about the nature of their relationship. This cessation of handholding comes a moment or two earlier than would be necessary for Frank to open the lobby door, and suggests the recurring motif of a strained romantic relationship that has been developed throughout the film. Once in the lobby a rotund police officer steps forward to make a joke at Frank's expense. Referring to Alice's comment several minutes earlier that she had information relating to Crewe's death in a tone meant to playfully mock her alleged detection skills, the constable tells Frank,

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"Watch out, you'll be losing your job." Frank, Alice, and the policeman begin to laugh quietly at the officer's comment, but as the camera pans closer the laughing grows louder, continuing far longer than would seem merited by the joke's worth. Alice glances nervously from one to the other, feigning appreciation of the joke, when she suddenly catches sight of Crewe's painting of the laughing jester as it is being removed to storage. It is interesting that the film concludes here, ending at the moment the police investigation itself has ended, a neat illustration of the interpenetration of theme and presentation.[7] Alice stands transfixed by Crewe's painting as Frank and the constable continue their good-natured ribbing. The camera lingers on the painting as it is carried through the lobby doors and down the corridor from which Frank and Alice have just emerged. The joking and laughing continue. Our final image of Alice, then, is of a terrified young woman whose unconvincing laughter seals within her the knowledge of her culpability.

The image, as Wood might say, is disturbing, but Hitchcock so completely masters the articulation (or perhaps, manipulation) of viewer subjectivity as to make Alice the most virtuous of killers. Indeed, Hitchcock makes evident that natural justice has been served precisely because bureaucratic justice has been thwarted, for it is the justice system's ethicality rather than its efficiency that Hitchcock places under scrutiny.[8] Indeed, if justice is the search for truth then Hitchcock presents us with a dilemma, for it is clearly neither the truth nor justice that will make Alice free. The only possibility for emancipation would appear to lie in her (and Frank's) silence concerning the truth. Even here, however, the freedom Alice might have gained by her silence is markedly ambiguous, for secrecy procures security at the cost of full and honest openness. Alice is condemned in this sense to her secret (again, shared with Frank) in a kind of existential compromise. If the film is to have a satisfactory conclusion—satisfactory in the sense that the wicked are punished and the righteous go free—then deceit is the fitting mechanism through which reason and compassion can successfully coexist. Alice can perhaps only be freed by confession, but Frank's involvement in covering up her actions has greatly complicated the relation between confession and indictment. Mutual guilt binds Frank and Alice together.

A form of intimacy that is common to many romantic couples now binds them, but the secret by which they are united challenges conventional thematic elements of the romantic film in powerful ways. The film also invokes the collusion of good and evil that I mentioned earlier. Alice appears to have acted in a morally responsible way, defending herself from Crewe's attack when her life was being threatened, but her subsequent behaviour has been to resist confessing her actions and taking responsibility for what she has done. And by bringing Frank into the orbit of her decisions Alice has set in motion a sequence of events that brings her and Frank into a private, conspiratorial union. Their relationship, in other words, is founded on a confidential knowledge, and the ethical status of this knowledge seems destined to contaminate all prospects of romantic fulfillment. It further threatens to privilege their individualist motives over the communitarian values by which the social order is maintained. Alice's spirited resistance to two transgressions—Crewe's illegal assault and the offense that would be com-

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mitted against her by the legal system—sets the stage for a difficult contestation between the moral impulse and the ethical code. As Bauman writes:

> Moral issues cannot be 'resolved', nor the moral life of humanity guaranteed, by the calculating and legislative efforts of reason. Morality is not safe in the hands of reason, though this is exactly what spokesmen of reason promise. . . . Reason is about making correct decisions, while moral responsibility precedes all thinking about decisions as it does not, and cannot care about any logic which would allow the approval of an action as correct. Thus, morality can be 'rationalized' only at the cost of self-denial and self-attrition. From that reason-assisted self-denial, the self emerges morally disarmed, unable (and unwilling) to face up to the multitude of moral challenges and cacophony of ethical prescriptions. At the far end of the long march of reason, moral nihilism waits: that moral nihilism which in its deepest essence means not the denial of binding ethical code, and not the blunders of relativistic theory—but the loss of ability to be moral. (Bauman, 1993, p. 247-248)

That Alice successfully escapes the judgment of the law likely strikes some viewers as signifying a rupture in the cultural order, a violation of the social contract, or perhaps, more simply, an indication of Hitchcock's oft-cited disdain for the police. For others however, Alice has eluded authoritarian violations of her liberties in going undetected by the police, and this is to be lauded as a victory over the machinery of inhuman bureaucracy. In her resistance to the instrumental reason that reveals itself in the "ethical prescriptions" that Bauman describes as manifested in the legal apparatus, Alice determines a life course that produces discontent and a doubly articulated guilt (guilt for Crewe's death and guilt for evading punishment for that death).

In addition, the function of the cinematic denouement in the bourgeois mode of representation has been turned topsy-turvy in *Blackmail*. We can say that there is a form of closure to *Blackmail* (the picture does end, and the characters are shown to have at least tentatively resolved a specific problem) but this narrative closure stands at some distance from the ideological closure that is traditionally entailed by the sight of the final credits. In *Blackmail*, the concluding image speaks at two levels. Denotatively, the image tells us that Frank and Alice are now in a position to enter into a connubial union. But at the connotative level the image is carceral, not emancipatory. Alice is trapped in a relationship with a man for whom she appears to have extraordinarily mixed emotions, and though Frank has been a victim of Alice's emotional inconstancy at times in the film, he now maintains a firmer grip on her life than ever before. It is unclear whether love motivated him to protect Alice from his police colleagues, or whether it was out of fear that his association with a woman who might publicly be accused of murder would badly affect his career, his social standing, and his masculinity. It is therefore reasonable to wonder if this ending is really a sly warning from Hitchcock that marriage is a form of prison? Indeed, if heterosexual pairing in the romantic cinema is ideologically equivalent to the establishment of a preferred mode of social order, upon what is this social order actually predicated?

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By concluding on this unsettling note the film parodies the convention of the traditional heterosexual union by suggesting a semantic relationship to the traditional romantic thriller all the while making syntactic diversions away from that same convention.[9] In other words, the requisite elements for the conventional heterosexual coupling are present in material form (boy does get girl, after all), but the tension produced by the mutual guilt that binds Alice and Frank together belies those material elements at a deeper level.[10] Private knowledge shared between romantic partners can easily be characterized as a form of mutual guilt insofar as such knowledge commonly produces a sense of isolation that can further enhance feelings of mystery and uniqueness. In Hitchcock's films heterosexual pairing is frequently achieved only after a series of adventures (and misadventures) have been completed and the couple, in a figurative purgatorial cleansing, are now ready for romantic closure. In *Blackmail*, these elements are present only as emblems of what might have been—they are semantically appropriate to the context but only in the most superficial of ways. From a syntactic point of view, they are inversions of matrimonial realization, serving instead to parody the very idea that intimacy is an essential state in which romantic partners might successfully isolate themselves from the social order. Romance is always and already infected by the suppositions of its surrounding culture. Shared longings and conspiratorial silence make *Blackmail* a remarkably curious kind of romantic thriller.

Blackmail gives us an ending that defamiliarizes viewer anticipation by making evident the illusory promises of the myth of moral perfectibility. Alice and Frank may be united by the film's end, but rather than provide answers the final image provokes many unsettling questions. Gadamer has pointed out that questioning enlarges the world of possibilities, opening subjects to further actions and clarifications (Gadamer, 2004). But as a concluding modality, the question is an unconventional cinematic strategy in the romantic thriller tradition, for rather than "tying things together" the question further unravels the narrative. The open-ended nature of the film's narrative may parallel the open-ended problem of moral ambivalence but it leaves a disquieting sentiment nonetheless. Though Alice has acted on her own initiative it is hard to see *Blackmail* as a meditation on free will. Rather, the narrative has a haunting claustrophobia about it that is owed in part to its conditions of production (Hitchcock's first use of sound equipment impelled numerous close shots) and to the tightening of the moral noose in which Alice has been snared. Twist and turn as she might, the prospect of a fitting moral denouement is denied her, and though this can be read as a subversive assault against male privilege it is clearly also a universal situation in which Alice is caught. In Bauman's words, the "contingency, contention, ambivalence and unanticipated consequences of human undertakings" is writ large in Hitchcock's film.

Ultimately it is Hitchcock's representation of moral ambivalence that makes *Blackmail* a rewarding and serious document of human striving. Whether or not the film is serious art is far less important. Alice and Frank are swept along by circumstances which, to paraphrase Marx, were not entirely of their own choosing. The weight of their actions may weigh like nightmares on their minds and on their consciences, but this is the price that freedom exacts of all moral agents. The

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freedom to choose, Hitchcock reveals, is paid for in consequences whose ramifications can often only dimly be recognized. Moral agency makes willing blackmailers of everyone.

Notes

1. I have previously discussed the question of morality in Hitchcock's work as it relates to the problem of faith in McCarron, 2002. Here my focus is more specifically on the issue of moral agency than on the problem of moral conduct per se.

2. See Steven Sanders (2007) recent work as one illustration of this tendency. Also, Tom Cohen's (2005) two-volume analysis of Hitchcock's work takes on the problem of the moral implications of Hitchcock's work in several places. Finally, many of the essays collected in Žižek (1992) deal with a range of moral and philosophical questions in Hitchcock's films.

3. See, for example, David Sterritt's *The Films of Alfred Hitchcock* (1993) for an account of Hitchcock's moral universe as oriented toward the redemption of the films' central characters. Thomas Hyde's *The Moral Universe of 'Spellbound'* offers a similar interpretation. A further discussion of the redemptive dimensions of Hitchcock's work is also provided in Brill (1999).

4. For an account of how Levinas's philosophy can be placed in the context of contemporary communication studies, (see Pinchevski, 2005).

5. On the canonization of Hitchcock as a *bona fide* auteur, see especially Kapsis, 1992.

6. In his *Against Ethics,* Caputo presents a similar argument:

> Obligation is always complicitous with systems of power and violence. Obligation inevitably produces violence and perpetuates evils, simply because whoever acts is woven into the texture of the world (polis) and implicated in worldly power. Whoever acts, whoever undertakes to meet an obligation, inevitably pulls the strings of power and creates new binds, creating new knots in the act of loosening old ones. The preferential option for the most oppressed causes injury to others, to those who are not as bad off. . . . We inevitably produce new evils in trying to solve existing ones. But that is no excuse not to act, not to do whatever we can. The imperative to act, the power of obligation, is urgent, incessant. Obligation never stops happening. It cannot be bracketed or suspended. The chords of obligation keep playing in the background. (Caputo, 1993, pp. 173–74)

7. This was Hitchcock's first sound film, and the idea of "bleeding" sound from one source to another seems a rather sophisticated understanding of how sight and sound could be connected metaphorically. It is also remarkable that Hitchcock blends the laughter from the constable and Frank, who are no longer in the frame, with the image of the jester whose laughing face taunts Alice. This cinematic effect creates a peculiar distortion in conventional conceptions of diegesis, for though the men's laughter is diegetic, it is displaced onto the canvass depicting the visage of the laughing jester. In this respect, it is diegetic sound with a non-diegetic element. This displacement also helps to heighten viewer anxiety about Alice's plight by creating an eerie representation of her feelings of guilt, the laughter goading Alice for her inaction.

8. Hitchcock is well known to have been intrigued by the police procedural as evidenced, for instance, by the opening sequences of *Blackmail* in which he devotes several minutes of the film to a documentary style exposé of British police practices in tracking down a robbery suspect. Nevertheless, the heart of *Blackmail* is not a deconstruction of investigative procedures, but a critique of the interpersonal evil that is done when bloodless principles are animated and living human connections are vanquished. The strained tension that juxtaposes Frank's moral obligations as a lover with his ethical responsibilities as a detective is emblematic of the problems that arise when ethical principles are pursued to the detriment of moral responsibility.

9. On the distinction between semantic and syntactic approaches to genre, see Rick Altman, 1984.

10. The concluding sequence to *Blackmail* plays with various inflections on blackmail as these have been deployed in the text. Crewe is a victim of Tracy's blackmail; Tracy is a victim of Frank's blackmail; and Alice is a victim of Frank's blackmail. The film appears to hypothesize blackmail as a kind of generic condition in which human desire is constantly implicated across the range of interpersonal and social relations.

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